

Babies or No Babies: Communicating with Feminine Bodies in Mom Lit

Handoyo, P.F.^{1*}, Djundjung, J.M.¹

¹ English Department, Petra Christian University, Surabaya, INDONESIA

e-mails: priskafebrinia@petra.ac.id; jennymd@petra.ac.id

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Mom-Lit, or Mommy Literature, can be seen as a form of challenging the feminine body's ideals and motherhood ideology. The article studies how the feminine bodies are represented in three Mom Lit: *Baby Proof* by Emily Giffin, *Shopaholic and Baby* by Sophie Kinsella, and *Confessions of A Bad Mother* by Stephanie Calman. The way the women describe different bodily experiences prompts questions and challenges to the ideal feminine body and womanhood, which are associated with motherhood. Using the review of Motherhood Ideology and the concept of Silent Body, this article takes a closer look on how the women in Mom Lit think and talk about their bodies. The analysis shows that Mom Lit presents silent body to relate with the childfree choice and offers different maternal body experience that is in contrast with the feminine body ideals. In the end, it can be concluded that Mom Lit constructs a new site of women's liberation by being receptive and communicative to the body.

Keywords: Mom Lit; Feminine Body; Silent Body; Maternal Body; Motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of being a woman has been introduced and taught since one is still young through family, friends, advertisements, films, music et cetera. The meaning of being a woman is closely connected to motherhood and mothering, as the quality of being a woman is defined by her ability to nurture and care. Not only is a woman expected to fit in the role of a mother, she also has to follow certain standards in order to be labeled as a good woman and mother. The society's discourse also accepts as true that taking care of the children is the main responsibility of a woman. There is also the term 'fatherhood,' but it is rarely used, or if it is used, the meaning it ascribes regarding the obligation and duty behind that term may be totally different from 'motherhood,' although both terms are referring to the role as parents.

Arendell's (2000) stated that Motherhood as an ideology is used to show that there are certain discourses in the society that attempt to uniform women's experience in Motherhood, using "the sentimental mother discourse" as the ideal (para. 9), which focus on the self-sacrificing, emotionally involving Mothers. For instance, the society believes that there is a close and intimate relationship between

mother and child. The interchangeable meaning of womanhood and motherhood is built around the values and competence in nurturing and taking care of others, and this is often described as uniform experience.

This has been a discussion in the matter: is it hard-wired in females' biological process? The more recent views on Motherhood question the existing social pressure on women to have children by highlighting their biological ability: how big the role of external conditioning is on the meaning of Motherhood and Mothering? Whether married or not, women are evaluated by the society by "what they think and don't think about mothering (the action) and being a mother (the role)" (Faulkner, 2013, p.1). This is closely linked to the women's body. In the traditional view of women, as well as cultural feminism, Collard and Contrucci (1988) observe that "women are linked by childbearing bodies" in which Rich (1986) refers to the biological tool such as womb, ovum, and hormones that makes them able to bear a child (as cited in Barker, 2002, p.110). Beauvoir (1949) in her famous book *The Second Sex* describes how women live their bodies in an objectified way, embodying the gaze of the other and producing their bodies as objects for others. The biological aspects of women's body is

understood as the base of identifying women's identity with motherhood. According to Bartlett (1994), and also Letherby and Williams (1999), if a woman does not conform to the ideals of maternal body, it is not counted and acknowledged by the society, and may be "viewed with doubt, suspicion and even disgust" (as cited in Peterson & Engwall, 201, p. 377).

Mom-Lit can be seen as a form of challenging the feminine body's ideals and motherhood ideology by putting forward the voice of different experiences in motherhood and mothers. There are different thoughts and experiences on feminine and/or maternal bodies; there are different views of what motherhood can mean to women; that motherhood is not the same since every woman is not always on the romantic side like what it is told: All of these can be found in Mom Lit. Mom Lit is a subgenre of Chick Lit, "any literature that is intended to appeal more to women than men, with a focus on strong or quirky females." ("What is Chick Lit?" para. 4). Mom Lit tells stories "about moms. It is from the point of view of the mother" (Lehmann, para. 21). For many women, mommy lit is written as "an act of breaking the silence and finding the courage to write the truth about their (mommies') lives." (Hewett, 2006, p. 131). Through mommy lit, the women are trying to tell the honest experience in facing motherhood. The authors, who sometimes are also auto-biographical, are the women who tell stories that go to the exact opposite direction of the society's ideal. Through fictional or auto-biographical characters, they share the joy of Motherhood and being a mother, but also mostly focus on the 'other' side of the ideal maternal body--the lack of the desire to conceive, the absence of instant bonding with their newborns, and generally the 'other' stories in experiencing motherhood.

Mom Lit acknowledges the ideals that women's identity is constructed around Motherhood, in which becoming a mother and nurturing children are identified with womanhood. Men are not expected to be a parent in the way that women are ["Men dash off to do things like climb mountains and freeze to death in the Antarctic because they can't have babies,' my mother always said (Calman, p. 25); "I just read this piece in a magazine the other day about men who can't cope with the idea of becoming a father. Apparently they often have affairs to compensate" (Kinsella, p. 88)]. Mom Lit also acknowledges how the society celebrates and cherishes pregnant body, as it embodies the ideal femininity, and is recognized also in Mom Lit through the eyes of the men ["Pregnant women are beautiful" (Giffin, p. 27); "You look glowing," (Kinsella, p. 15)]. Because of this

discourse, a woman who cannot relate to the excitement of being a mother may feel as if she deviates from the standard identity of womanhood, and therefore, alienated ["I *wanted* to want children; I didn't enjoy feeling abnormal. I longed to join in ... I wanted to 'get it'." (Calman, p. 6)]. This has resulted in the way the society does not take kindly to women who intend to avoid the experience of motherhood. Smith claims that "women have been alienated from their experiences because they have not been able to represent and understand them on their own terms." (as cited in Maynard, 1998, p. 249). They may feel alienated as they are put onto the construction of interchangeable identity of being a woman and a mother.

I am going to use three Mom Lit written by three different women. Here, the protagonists have different experiences and opinion about Motherhood. In *Shopaholic and Baby*, the main character has to face the fear of not being a good mother and the anxiety that her husband may leave her because he cannot bear the responsibility of being a father. In *Baby Proof*, the main character faces the dilemma of maintaining her childless life. Throughout the story, she has to cope with the guilty feeling and the questions of what kind of woman she really is for not wanting a child, even though it is to save her marriage. In *Confessions of a Bad Mother*, the main character deals with the reality of having children and taking care of them. She is sure that she is totally incapable of being a good mother that everyone expects.

This article looks at how feminine bodies are presented in Momlit, in response to the feminine body ideals and Motherhood ideology. Using the review on Motherhood as an Ideology by Arendell (2000) and the concept of Silent Body by Peterson & Engwall (2013), this article looks at how feminine bodies are presented by the protagonists, as well as how they are contested against the society's discourse.

THE SILENT BODY

Mom Lit offers the women's own terms in motherhood by showing the childfree choice as normal, as they are the natural result of "Silent Bodies". The term "Silent Bodies" was first coined by Peterson & Engwal (2013) in their research about voluntary childlessness. Silent bodies are "bodies without a biological urge to reproduce" (p. 376). Instead of alienating themselves from the motherhood experience, women with silent bodies see the absence of the desire to conceive, or so-called 'maternal instinct,' as a way their bodies communicating with

them, and therefore, being receptive to what the body wants is natural. Acknowledging silent bodies means acknowledging the biological-based reasons and cultural similarities behind the decision to have or not to have children. In addition to seeing the decision to remain childfree is natural/biological response to the absence of the desire to have children; being pregnant “should be preceded by a strong and irresistible longing for children” (p. 386).

The heroines in mom-lit take part in acknowledging and supporting the silent body by telling their experiences in a more positive tone, or questioning the discourse that is enforced upon them. In *Baby Proof*, the main character, Claudia, had come to the decision that she never wants to be a mother since she was young. She believes that having children is not her kind of thing. Even as a kid, she enjoyed playing dolls by assuming her roles as “good Aunt Claudia” (Giffin, p. 5). The conflict in the book begins when her husband Ben, whose philosophy is “If the best part of having kids early is getting it over with, and the best part about having kids late is putting off the drudgery, doesn't it follow that not having kids at all is the best of both worlds?” (Giffin, p. 8), suddenly breaks the deal by changing his mind about their voluntary childfree life. Faced to this sudden change, Claudia's strategy is to remind him of her absence of maternal call:

“I don't want to be a mother ... I'm sorry if that makes me selfish. But what I think is way worse—way *more* selfish— is having a child when you're not fully committed to the idea of it.” (Giffin, p. 27)

Claudia's response to Ben acknowledges the ‘label’ of her reluctance to having a child as selfish, which says a lot about the the negative stereotype to the women who voluntarily want to be childfree, as they detach themselves from the feminine ideal, which culturally “link of the idea of being a ‘real woman’ with being a mother” (in Peterson & Engwal, 2013, p. 377). Instead of questioning or deploring her lack of maternal instinct (to want a baby), she understands it as a logical act *not* to have children when the desire is missing. Instead of looking at herself from the point of view of the society on voluntarily childfree women—with doubt, suspicion, or disgust—she constructs her own understanding of her feminine body with a logical approach in relation to the responsibility as a parent: if the maternal desire is absent, it is her responsibility *not* to have a child.

Another important person in Claudia's life, her best friend, Jess, also cannot understand her insistence in not wanting a child. She believes that maternal

instinct is planted inside each woman, she only has to ‘dig’ it to let it come out.

I sip my coffee, think for a second, and instead of rehashing my usual reasons, I say, “Did I ever tell you about the study of mice missing the Mest gene?”

She shakes her head. “Nah. Doesn't ring a bell.”

“Well, there was this study where scientists determined that mice missing this one particular gene—the Mest gene—have an abnormal response to their newborns. Basically, without this gene, they have no mothering instinct, and so they didn't feed or care for their young the way the other mice did.”

“So? Are you saying that you're missing the Mest gene?”

“I'm just saying that some women probably don't have that mothering instinct I don't think I have it.”

“Not at *all*! Not even a trace of it?” she asks.

“Because I've heard a lot of women say that they thought they didn't have it until they had a baby of their own. And then, voila! Nurture city.”

“Is that a safe gamble?” I ask. “What if it doesn't kick in [...] what if I'm sorry I had a baby at all? What then?” (Giffin, p. 33)

Jess hardly believes that Claudia has no maternal instinct at all which makes her not to want children. Crawley et al (2008) mentioned that motherhood is “reduced to maternal instincts and drives”, or “biologized” (as cited in in Peterson & Engwal, 2013, p. 377), resulting in the maternal instinct in every woman taken for granted. That a woman does not want children or does not have the natural feeling to nurture is hard, if it is not impossible, to accept, as motherhood is understood as the essence of womanhood. Responding to this Feminine Ideals, Claudia describes the silent body by, first, acknowledging the absence of maternal call/instinct as biological. She compares herself with mice which miss the gene that is responsible for maternal instinct. Instead of seeing herself in from inside the feminine ideal, she views the lack of maternal drives from biological point of view. This can also be read as a way to experience outside the ‘natural’ gendered body, as it is, according to Butler (1993); Malson and Swann (2003) “sociohistorically specific, normative and discursively constructed (in Peterson & Engwal, 2013, p. 378). Because it is biological, she also sees the way her husband tries to convince her to turn her back on this ‘biological determinism’ (absence of maternal call) as more selfish. Second, she also backs up her silent body by questioning the romanticized maternal instinct: if she forces to fight against her body by having children to fit within the womanhood identity,

there is always a possibility of the prolonged absence of the lack of maternal call even after having the kid, because the silent body is *natural*.

Because silent body is also a natural female body, "Pregnancies and childbearing could also be considered as a threat to the female body" (Peterson & Engwall, 2013, p. 385). The society's idealized view on maternal bodies when conceiving is contested against the risk it brings to the female body.

I resist the urge to point out the obvious that a child might jeopardize our love life. That we'd have little time or energy for sex. That we wouldn't be able to put each other first anymore" (Giffin, p. 26).

Pregnancy can also be seen as having a bad transformative effect to the female body, including the risk of a changed sex life. This is related to what Hewett points out, that the women's challenge "lies in integrating her new role into her former identity" (Hewett, p. 120). Although society idealizes pregnant body ["Pregnant women are beautiful" (Giffin, p. 27); "You look glowing," (Kinsella, p. 15)], becoming a mother can make a huge difference in a woman's life and threaten to their former body, and therefore identity, especially for women with no reproduction drives, or ones with silent bodies.

Through their main characters, Mom Lit uses *Silent Bodies* to oppose the stiff relationship of femininity and motherhood. The missing desire to have children is natural, therefore it is being communicative and responsible to the body to abstain from reproduction, as it is being responsible and communicative to the body to have kids when the desire appears. Because it is natural to have zero maternal call, pregnancies or conceiving a child can be seen as a threat or damage to their bodies. Silent bodies "have transformative power to contest the meanings attached to womanhood" (Peterson 387) because it acknowledges the feminine bodies without maternal instinct/drive.

THE MATERNAL BODY

Mom Lit offers alternative constructions in Maternal Body: it challenges the embodied knowledge that maternal body would have maternal instinct that culturally is accepted as natural or true ["It's intriguing, watching all these mothers looking after their babies, feeding and changing them, cuddling them and holding a little murmured conversations. Will I be able to do this?" (Calman, pp. 56-57)]. Whether as a part that intensifies the story plot in the book, or told in a jokingly manner, Mom Lit usually acknowledges this exclusive Motherhood ideology imposed on them or their characters.

The society's discourse on maternal feelings in women, such as self-sacrificing and nurturing the children as natural, while the paternal feeling is not. Women are expected to want to be pregnant and instantly create bond with her children ["contraction can be intense...but it's a positive pain (Kinsella, p. 105); "if you don't actually give birth, your body fails to release oxytocin and bonding doesn't occur" (Calman, p. 53)] because they are "wired for a greater inclination toward bonding with baby as a consequence of hormone production" (Barker, 2002, p. 119). The obligation to want, take care of, and have a connection with the babies culturally belongs to the women, and is sourced in women's Maternal Body. Women themselves may be alienated from their own bodies because of these gendered ideals, as stated by Crawley et al., (2008), "constitute one interpretative scheme that determines how we experience our bodies" (as cited in Peterson & Engwall, 2013, p. 378).

The women in Mom Lit share stories about how they experience their maternal bodies that are not in the context of maternal ideals.

Firstly, the myth that maternal instinct applies to all women is broken by offering different narrative of how pregnancy is understood.

"Besides, you'll only be pregnant for nine months. A blip on the radar of life."

"Easy for you to say. I don't want to be invaded like that, no matter how short the time frame..." (Giffin, p. 27)

Are you saying there is a Live Person inside my body? Whom I haven't even met? It must be witchcraft. (Calman, p. 37)

"Ooh!" I say. "It kicked really hard!"

"You wait till it starts poking knees out and stuff," says Suze. "It's so freaky, like having an alien inside you." (Kinsella, p. 43)

The quotations from three different Mom Lit offer different narratives on being pregnant. In the first quotation, Claudia associates being pregnant as 'being invaded', which essentially means that she does not want her body to be occupied by an intruder. In the second quotation, while being pregnant, Stephanie feels she has no connection at all with the baby. She contrasts other people's belief that having a baby inside the womb is normal, to her own feeling towards the pregnancy as eerie, referring it as 'witchcraft'. In addition, in the third quotation, Suze refers the feeling of bearing a baby as 'freaky.' In contrast to the idealized bond of mother-children, the women consider the baby as the outsider. What we can ascribe from the quotations above is that they feel

being pregnant has this intrusive effect; that having a baby inside their body does not feel natural. These different narratives show that the women experience their 'natural' body and produce self-knowledge about their bodies, instead of looking at it from the uniform motherhood discourse.

Secondly, the romanticized idea that delivering a child is a beautiful experience for women is questioned and challenged.

I just couldn't see what was beautiful and moving about expelling a live creature – covered in blood and slime – from the most private part of you. And in front of other people. Were they really asking me to believe I could withstand an entirely new person springing out of my body? I mean, I'd seen something similar in *Alien*, and it looked like a hell of a way to spend a Friday night. (Calman, p. 13).

Stephanie never considers herself as the type of 'ideal' feminine; she has no connection to the world of motherhood and maternal instinct; she cannot identify herself with the society's idealistic image of child delivery. It is clear that she is not affected by the romantic view of how delivering a child is a beautiful and wonderful experience. However, she cannot understand this experience without relating it to her own opinion that she has masculine-qualities, like she says, "[o]h, testosterone. It's true. I do have too much of it; it goes with having polycystic ovaries and hairy upper lip. If it wasn't for electrolysis I'd look like Tom Selleck." (Calman, p. 24). How Stephanie identifies herself as a "half man", in which she "hates chatting on the phone and can read maps" (Ibid.), is a plea to excuse her ignorance and deviation about motherhood. She looks at her less-than-ideal maternal body experience from the point of view of man, showing that there is a fear that if she is not able to fulfill her body's divine decree: a life-giving container.

Despite relating it to the too much testosterone, the story offers different way of seeing the process of delivering a child. By describing her own understanding of child-delivery explicitly ("expelling a live creature", "blood and slime", "from the most private part"), with the bad feelings that come with it ("Alien", "looked like a hell"), Stephanie presents the lack of reproduction urge in the maternal body.

Mom Lit sometimes also rejects the whole romantic idea of child delivery by presenting the real experiences of mothers and ridiculing the idealized ones.

"Yes, contractions can be intense," Noura continues. "But your bodies are designed to withstand them. And what you must remember is, it's a positive pain. I'm sure you'll both agree?" She looks over at Mum and Janice, who has got out her knitting and is clicking away.

"Positive?" Janice looks up, horrified. "Ooh no, dear. Mine was agony. Twenty-four hours in the cruel summer heat. I wouldn't wish it on any of you poor girls."

"They have better drugs these days," chimes in Mum. "My advice is take everything they've got" [...]

"Dear, when you're gripped by agony and wanting to die, a bath doesn't really help!" [...]

"But it was worth it in the end? The pain seemed a small price to pay, compared to the life-affirming joy?"

"Well..." Mum gives me a doubtful glance. "Of course, I was delighted to have my little Becky. But I did keep it at the one child. We both did, didn't we, Janice?"

"Never again." Janice shudders. "Not if you paid me a million pounds."

As I glance around the room I can see that all the girls' faces have frozen [...] "Right!" says Noura, making an obvious effort to stay pleasant. (Kinsella, pp. 105-106).

Noura, the pre-natal coach, is the representative of traditional view on women, which says that "women are linked by childbearing bodies" and celebrates the meaning of being a woman, which "source [is] in motherhood" (Barker, 2002, p. 110). The adjectives she uses to explain women's body and the process of delivering a child as "positive", "worth it", and "life-affirming joy". All of these are rooted in the image of a good mother who is selfless and wholly child-centered. For whatever purposes, the society has agreed that the pain during the labor and delivering a child is the normal/natural way that has to be undergone by women. In the romanticized view of Motherhood, the pain during the process of delivering a child is nothing compared to the "life-affirming joy", as she accomplishes her main duty as a woman (as her body is "designed to withstand" the pain). Because motherhood is considered as the nature of a woman, they are expected to feel good in experiencing it.

This idea is challenged by the heroine's Mom and her neighbor, Janice. Representing the women who have 'got it', they reject the romantic view of child delivery. Noura is offering to the soon-to-be mothers by describing the experience as "agony", making them "wanting to die", and making them promise not to do

more even for a million pounds. When challenged by this unromantic view of delivering a child, instead of combating it with her own real romantic experience, Noura is upset. It is either she has not had delivered baby on her own, or lies about it. By doing this, Mom Lit ridicules the idealized view on maternal body and has the readers take side with the other experience of Motherhood who 'listens' to the honest response from the bodies.

Thirdly, the knowledge that there is an instant bonding between mothers and child as a result of women's reproductive body is also challenged.

Moments later I feel Lawrence in my arms. What was that? It wasn't like love, it was like having my drink spiked [...] I am not in control here. I've been taken over by some kind of – force – like with Captain Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise when they were taken over by the aliens who controlled them with invisible, low budget telepathy. (Calman, pp. 62-63).

Even when a woman has the 'maternal call' and decides to have children, it is not a guarantee that the maternal body will respond by producing an instant strong bond with the child, as it is known within the gendered body ideals. The absence of love and intimacy is clear when the nurse hands over Stephanie's child, Lawrence. She describes the feeling of losing control of herself, in which she has been taken over by a force she does not know. She only does everything for the baby because she is supposed to, not because she wants to. There is only the feeling of peculiarity, as the body produces its own knowledge regarding the baby.

Women may feel alienated towards their own experiences in motherhood if they 'read' their bodies through the naturalized gendered body. The women in Mom Lit open a new way to understand the maternal body by communicating the 'natural' respond of their bodies towards pregnancy, child-delivery, and mother-child bond. The ideal that maternal instinct applies to all women, delivering a child is a beautiful, and that there is an instant bonding between mothers and child is shattered, as the women in the story externalize their bodily reactions.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to see how Mom-Lit responds to the Motherhood Ideology by looking at how they present female bodies. Ideal feminine body has always been represented by its ability to be the life-giving vessel; to conceive a child. That is what makes it different from male body. In addition to the ability

of giving life, the ideal feminine body is also expected to long for and be the nurturer of the child, and having a close bond to him/her because her body produces hormones that are designed to create that maternal feeling. In response to these ideals, Mom Lit puts forward two different bodies. The first is silent body. Silent body is a feminine body which does not have the desire to reproduce. Silent body is used in Mom Lit to challenge the rigid association of femininity and Motherhood. The characters in Mom Lit see the decision of being childfree as a way to being receptive to the body who wants no child. This decision is seen as being mature and responsible, as in opposition to the decision of having a child when one does not really want it, which is seen as selfish. Therefore it challenges to the expectation that every woman *would* want a child. In addition, because silent body is also a natural feminine body, conceiving a child can be seen as a threat to a woman's body and identity, as it can badly transform the body. This, again, strengthens the idea that being absent from having a child makes more sense when the body does not want it. The second is maternal body. Mom Lit offers different construction of maternal body by challenging the idea that maternal instinct exist in feminine body because it has childbearing organs such as womb and oxytocin. Mom Lit presents the idea that despite having the womb and the hormone, women may not have the maternal call or instinct, and have negative bodily experience towards child delivery and nurturing the child. The women in Mom Lit externalizes their own maternal body experience, which challenges the Motherhood Ideology. By the way Mom Lit presents the feminine bodies, it actually shows itself as a new site of Liberation by being communicative and receptive to the true experience of the body.

REFERENCES

- Arendell, T. (2000). Mothering and motherhood: A decade review. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, Special Issue: Decade Reviews*, 62(4), (n.p.). Retrieved from <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/berkeley/papers/3.pdf>
- Barker, C. (2002). Identity, equality and difference: The politics of gender. In C. Barker (Ed.). *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* (pp. 108-129). London: Sage Publication Inc.
- Beauvoir, S. D., Borde, C., and Malovany-Chevallior, S. (2010). *The second sex*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Calman, S. (2005). *Confessions of a bad mother*. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Faulkner, S. L. (2013). Bad mom(my) litany: Spanking cultural myths of middle-class motherhood. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, XX(X), 1-9.

- Giffin, E. (2007). *Baby proof*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Hewett, H. (2006). You are not alone: The personal, the political, and the "new" mommy lit. In S. Ferriss & M. Young (Eds.). *Chick lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (pp. 119-138). New York: Routledge.
- Kinsella, S. (2007). *Shopaholic and baby*. London: Bantam Press.
- Lehmann, S. (n.d). *Why mom lit?* Retrieved from <http://www.momlit.com/>
- Maynard, M. (1998). Women's studies. In S. Jackson & J. Jones (Eds.). *Contemporary Feminist Theories* (247-258). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Peterson, H. & Engwall, K. Silent bodies: Childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(4), 376-389.
- What is chick lit? (n.d.). *Chick lit books*. Retrieved from <http://chicklitbooks.com/whatis.php>>